

Guide to Online Primary Sources for the Constitution and the Making of the Nation

The Web is an incredible source of information but also an incredible source of misinformation since anybody can post anything. So it's "browser beware" when it comes to finding out about American history there. On the other hand, more and more primary source materials are available online and these, straight from the horse's mouth, are generally reliable. The selected archival sites I've listed certainly are. Beginning here and ending where you will, you can discover more than any single volume can give you—thousands of voices from those who actually participated in our nation's founding.

To access any of these sites, either place the initial *italicized* words in your browser or go directly to the URL address on the following line. You can navigate within each major site by clicking the words I've italicized.

A Century of Lawmaking for A New Nation (Library of Congress)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/>

This is an amazingly rich source for political life in the Founding Era, starting with the Continental Congress in 1774 and continuing through the Jefferson years and beyond. All items are searchable, but selective browsing can sometimes yield great results. Here's how. For the years before the Constitutional Convention in 1787, click *Journals of the Continental Congress* and then *Browse*. That leads you to a listing of all the volumes and years, and at the bottom, a *contents* and *index* for each year. If you want to learn about lotteries, for instance, click the index for each year, then look for "lottery." You'll find enough information for at least a term paper. Or you can find all drafts of the Articles of Confederation and track the debates. Similarly, look up any delegate and follow his progress. To access any page (the numbering starts new each year), find and click the appropriate volume and on that page click *Navigator*, which lists dates. Click *page image*, which gives you a visual image of the printed journal, and in the box at the top, enter the page you want. Once you're on a page or date, click *link to date-related documents* to see what people were writing about on that day. (For additional context, do this for a few days before and after.) An alternate way to access these letters is to return to the homepage and on the top menu click *Letters of Delegates to Congress*. This route is difficult to browse by date but doable by trial and error. You can also try *search*, but the entries do not come up in chronological order.

There are four more very useful items at *Century of Lawmaking*. On the homepage menu, *Farrand's Records* contains all notes and journals of the Constitutional Convention, Madison's included but also several others. These are organized by date, and again, click *Navigator* to start. *Elliot's Debates* leads you to a host of documents relating to the debates over ratification of the

Constitution, including proceedings at the various state conventions. On the right side of the homepage menu you'll see the official House and Senate Journals, but these contain only the official proceedings, which are sometimes difficult to interpret. The *Annals of Congress*, however, has the juicy debates. Also, for the first federal Congress, *Maclay's Journal* reads like a rich novel. William Maclay was an avowedly partisan Anti-Federalist within an overwhelmingly Federalist Senate, so his journal must be read in that context.

The Founders' Constitution (University of Chicago Press and Liberty Fund)

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/>

If you want to know what the founders had to say about any particular part of the Constitution or Bill of Rights, this is the site for you. It's broken down article-by-article, section-by-section, and clause-by-clause. First, click *Contents*, then *Fundamental Documents*, then *Constitution and First Twelve Amendments* (or consult the Constitution from any other source). Locate the number for the article, section, and clause you're wondering about, then go back to *Contents* and click that number. There you'll find what John Locke or the English jurist William Blackstone or various people of the Founding Era, both Federalists and Anti-Federalists, had to say about the matter before, during, and after the framing of the Constitution. You'll also find relevant court decisions. Congress can regulate commerce? The president can call up the militia? The right to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed? You name it, then read about it. Particularly if you prefer to interpret the Constitution according to either the "original intent" or "original meanings" method (see chapter 12), this site is a must.

Avalon Project (Yale Law School)

<http://avalon.law.yale.edu/>

This site includes a wide range of documents in law, history, and diplomacy. There are two ways to approach it. On the homepage, you can click *18th Century Documents*, but this leads to an alphabetical list that is not exactly user-friendly. (Hamilton's argument for his bank, for instance, is listed under "A" for "Alexander.") I'd suggest instead clicking *Document Collections*. On the long list that comes up, a few items stand out. *Colonial Charters, Grants and Related Documents* brings up a list of colonies, and when you click one, you get a complete list of that colony's founding documents, chronologically arranged. *The American Constitution: A Documentary Record* leads to a variety of documents relating to the Constitution, arranged chronologically. These include, among a host of others, the Magna Carta (1215), the confederation of the United Colonies of New England (1643), the Articles of Association, generally known as the Continental Association (1774), the Articles of Confederation (1781), the various notes of the Federal Convention, including Madison's (1787), the Federalist Papers (1787-8), and the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions (1798-9).

Madison's Notes on Debates and the *Federalist Papers* can also find on the list on the *Document Collections* page, and they appear in very easy-to-use formats.

Several other document collections on the Avalon site are useful if not always complete. These include, in alphabetical order: *American Diplomacy: Bilateral Treaties*, *American History: A Chronological Record* (this is very handy), *American Revolution—A Documentary Record*, *Inaugural Addresses*, *Jefferson Papers*, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, *Native Americans: Treaties*, *Presidential Papers*, *Quasi-War with France*, *Slavery: Statutes and Treaties*, and *United States Statutes concerning Native Americans*. Perhaps because the site is hosted by legal scholars rather than historians, it posts the disputed *Mecklenburgh Resolutions* of 1775, for which there is no contemporary documentation.

Note: You can search the Avalon site on the upper right corner of any page. When you plug in a term and a list comes up, it will include references from the Avalon site. If you click "search the web," you'll be out on a global browser, tapping into everything under the sun.

First Federal Congress Project (George Washington University)
<http://www.gwu.edu/~ffcp/>

This site helps you understand how the new government under the Constitution was launched. It provides brief sections of original documents with contextual explanations. Click *Online Exhibit*. From there, you can view the exhibit sequentially by clicking *next*, or you can select topics from the list farther down the page, or you can click *Contents* at the bottom. If you're a teacher, you'll naturally want to click *Teacher's Guide* as well.

Online Library of Liberty (Liberty Fund)
<http://oll.libertyfund.org/>

This site is jam-packed, but you need to navigate it carefully to get to the good historical materials from the Founding Era. College student alert: find a topic for your paper here! Start by clicking *Groups & Collections* on the left menu of the homepage, then click *American Revolution and the Constitution*. The very first item on the list, a two-volume set called *American Political Writings during the Founding Era*, contains many lesser known but very revealing documents such as *A Discourse at the Dedication of the Tree of Liberty*, *The People the Best Governors*, Benjamin Rush's *Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools*, Robert Coram's *Political Inquiries* (see chapter 23), John Leland's *Connecticut Dissenters' Strong Box* (see chapter 17), and Noah Webster's *1802 Oration on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence* (see chapter 24). Down the list, look for the collected papers or works of important but less celebrated founders James Wilson, John Jay, and Gouverneur Morris, as well as Thomas Paine. You will also find John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (see

chapter 7), the *Pacificus-Helvidius Debates* between Hamilton and Madison (see chapter 19), Paul Leicester Ford's collection of *Pamphlets of the Constitution* during the ratification debates (see chapter 14), and three of the four histories of the American Revolution written at the time: David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*, Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (see chapter 23), and John Marshall's *Life of George Washington*. (The fourth, not available here, is William Gordon's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America*.) Finally, you will find older collections of the works of Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison that served as standard references until the middle of the twentieth century. While most of the newer collections are available on the Net only by subscription, and while several new collections are not yet completed, the dated collections here are handy and therefore welcomed. Most of the important letters and public writings are included.

George Washington Resources (University of Virginia Library)
<http://etext.virginia.edu/washington/>

The prime resource on this site is on the main menu: *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, 1931-44. Through the middle years of the 20th century this was the standard Washington printed reference. The digitized version here is searchable. Unfortunately, the index for each volume does not include page references to the printed edition. This makes tracking down citations from scholarly works a bit time consuming, but you can still do it by focusing on dates. The home page will also whet your appetite by taking you to the digital edition of the updated and more complete *Papers of George Washington*, still in process. But it's look-don't-touch because access is limited. Research libraries purchase access, and unless you are independently wealthy, you'd probably have to go through them.

Jefferson Digital Archive (University of Virginia Library)
<http://guides.lib.virginia.edu/TJ>

There are several threads to follow here. First, click *Jefferson Quotations*. This will take you to the *Jefferson Cyclopedia*, a remarkable collection of key quotations on topics that are easily searchable. Enter "embargo," for instance, and you will see the story as it evolves through his eyes. Or click *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia: Quotations* for a less comprehensive but still interesting collection. Back on the homepage, click *Texts by Jefferson*, then *Papers of Thomas Jefferson-Digital Edition*. When that page comes up, click *Enter* and you seem to have access to the entire new collection of Jefferson Papers, fully indexed and searchable. But alas, again, it's look-don't-touch. You need to buy in or go through a research library to call up any documents. There are exceptions, though. Click *Founding Era Collection*, then *Founders Early Access*, and you will gain access to volumes of the Washington, Adams, and Madison papers that are

still in the process of being edited for publication.

American Memory (Library of Congress)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

Click *Presidents* to get to the original papers of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—and by “original” I mean handwritten, not transcribed. Unfortunately, the reproduction and digitizing processes compound the difficulty in reading handwritten sources such as these, so good luck deciphering them. Washington’s diaries, though, are transcribed. Also on the American Memory homepage, you can browse by topic (*Government and Law, Religion, Presidents*, etc.) or click *More Browsing Options* and then, under *Browse Collections by Time Period*, select 1700–1799. Either way will lead you to several useful collections, all searchable and indexed. In particular, look for collections under these categories: *African-American Odyssey, Broadides and Printed Ephemera, Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention, Louisiana Purchase, Manuscript Division, Ohio River Valley, Presidential Inaugurations, Religious Petitions (Virginia), Revolutionary Era Maps, Slavery and Law, Southern Black Churches*, and the presidential papers mentioned above. If you’re a teacher, be sure to click *Teachers* on the home page, then *Classroom Materials*. Here you’ll find a wealth of lesson plans, primary sources selected for classroom use, and so on.

Religion and the Founding of the American Republic (Library of Congress)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html>

Religion was a key part of the lives of most people in the Founding Era and this site gives a survey history bolstered by a wide variety of documentary evidence. It includes engravings and other graphics from the time period, along with the Library’s text and explanation.

Religious Liberty Archive (The Religious Institutions Group)

<http://www.churchstatelaw.com/>

On the homepage click *Historical Materials* to find colonial charters, state constitutions, bills and legislation, Congressional debates on the First Amendment, and all manner of primary documents from people like Roger Williams or John Locke, and from our first presidents.

History Matters (American Social History Project, CUNY and George Mason University)

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>

This site broadens history’s perspective. On the homepage click *many pasts*. Over 1,000 first hand documents appear in vaguely chronological order. This allows you to find the few dozen from the Founding Era. Here you can read several accounts from those who were not legally citizens at the time—slaves, women, and Native Americans. Look also for shoemaker George Hewes’s accounts of the Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party, the journal of Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, Herman Husband’s case for the North Carolina Regulators, and Benjamin Franklin

Bache's defense of the French Revolution (see chapter 20). Alexander McDougall, on behalf of New York City's workingmen, calls upon rich merchants to honor a Nonimportation agreement, and a fearful slaveowner worries that the black Haitian Revolution might spread to the United States. You get the drill—this site helps round out the story.

Back on the homepage, click *making sense of evidence* for an informal, online course on how to deal with documentary sources. This is particularly helpful for teachers. Also, click [www.history](http://www.history.org) and then *Revolution and the New Nation* for a potpourri of external links. These include the ones mentioned here but also several others. From here, though, you're on your own. Take off and have some fun.

Concluding Research Tips

When conducting Internet research, you will likely discover that a few quotes from founders are used over and over because they appear to support a particular viewpoint. If you want to find out the context for a quotation, or if you want to cite it for a college paper, try typing several exact words, within quotation marks, into your search engine. You'll get numerous hits, but try to find one from an academic book or paper that cites the original source. Then, by looking up that citation, you can place the quotation in its proper context.

If you want to take your research further, you might want to go to a university library and take advantage of tools there. Most will have the recently edited works of the most famous founders, with very helpful notes that contextualize the documents. Many also subscribe to services unavailable at home to the unaffiliated researcher. Usually, they allow people to use these onsite at designated computers. That's how you can access the *Early American Newspapers* collection, and newspapers were the major medium for politics in those days. (This series is on microfilm as well.) Also at these libraries, you can access the digital version of Charles Evans's very thorough collection of printed material prior to 1800, known as *Early American Imprints, Series 1*.

One final note. Although you can do much of your research at home and online, and more yet at university libraries, there are limits. Several very important sources are *not* online, and we don't want history to be driven exclusively by what gets digitized. In the National Archives, thousands upon thousands of depositions from Revolutionary War veterans await serious researchers. Similarly, the records of countless town meetings and Revolutionary committees, conventions, and congresses have not crossed the digital divide. If we leave all these out of the picture, we will lose a large portion of our Revolutionary heritage. We will also skew history in favor of the few famous figures whose words are more extensively available.

So I end with this plea. If you really get into this stuff, take at least one visit to some archive with *real* original sources, the stuff that's not out there yet on the Internet. It's a special feeling and can yield extraordinary results.